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12,200 words.

THE ANTHROPIC CODE

DRAFT

Chapters One and Two

by Jared Pereira

CHAPTER 1

I was someone once.

I think.

She existed. Or she was aware of existing.

A courtyard. Warm stone beneath her feet. People moving in shadows. Celeste raised her hand to scratch her nose.

No—she didn't. She hadn't moved at all. The itch remained, an infinitesimal irritation, barely perceptible but persistent. She tried again.

Nothing. Static control.

A fly landed on her cheek, its delicate legs brushing against her skin. She willed herself to blink.

She didn't.

It was a dream. She knew this. But she still couldn't wake.

The scream never reached her lips.

Standing.

Reality fractured, then snapped into place.

Celeste gasped awake, breath sharp and uneven. Darkness pressed around her—

familiar, but wrong. Like a corrupted memory, warped by time.

The coarse sheets, damp with sweat, bunched under her fingers, grounding her. But the air felt stale, metallic—sealed in too long.

She blinked. Once. Twice. The weight on her chest eased, but her skin still prickled, as though something had been crawling over it—tiny legs, quick and skittering.

She rubbed her face, fingers pressing hard against the bridge of her nose.

No fly. Nothing.

Just the lingering spectre of a dream dissolving at the edges of consciousness.

Her muscles ached—not from rest, but from standing too still for too long. A dull, insistent pressure throbbed at the base of her skull, like a bruise she couldn't see.

She reached for the glass of water on the nightstand.

It wasn't there.

A breath later, it was.

Celeste stilled. Her fingers hovered above the glass. She hadn't moved it. She knew she hadn't.

Or had she?

No. A cognitive discrepancy. A trick of perception. The rational part of her mind labelled it as such, but unease coiled in her stomach.

The feeling clung to her—like him. Like the way he used to wake in the middle of the night, staring at things no one else could see. The way his hands would tremble, clutching at shadows.

Her stomach twisted.

She pressed her palms hard against her eyes, as if she could squeeze the thought out of her skull.

Not like him. I'm not like him.

Exhaling slowly, she forced herself to move.

Her legs ached. Stiff. Familiar.

She already knew what she would find, but she pulled the sheets aside anyway, pressing her palm to her thigh.

Fifteen scars. Some faded, others fresh.

The newest one was still raw, not yet fully healed. Her fingernail traced over it, pressing just enough to feel the sharpness, but not enough to break the skin. The pressure steadied her. A tether.

She reached into the nightstand drawer, fingers closing around the cold handle of a kitchen knife, its serrated edge still marked with dried blood.

She placed the blade on her thigh, aligning it with the previous incisions. A deep inhale. The slight tremor in her breath. And then—

A precise pull of the knife, just enough pressure to part the skin.

Pain flared, bright and clear, driving back the heaviness pressing in behind her eyes.

For a moment, everything else fell away.

But the silence left space for other thoughts.

Her father had spoken of things that weren't there. At first, he'd dismissed them. Then, one day, they never left.

He used to tap — endless rhythms, the pads of his fingers striking out some private code until his nails split and his fingers bled.

A warning she hadn't recognised until it was too late.

Not tapping. Not the same.

But wasn't it?

Her own private code. A language only she could understand. A way to stay sharp, to stay grounded.

She wouldn't end up like him.

But her fingers stayed tight around the blade, like letting go would mean losing everything.

Her throat tightened.

No. This was different.

Still, the thought gnawed at her, quiet and persistent like a worm burrowing deep.

For now.

She exhaled sharply, sinking back into the pillows, savouring the momentary relief. The knife dangled from her fingers. She started to set it down—

But paused.

Her gaze lingered on the blade, watching as a single drop of blood trembled at the tip before falling — a stark red bead against sterile wood.

She traced the smear, as if pressing it in could erase it.

Dragging a fingernail down her palm — just hard enough to leave a mark.

Real. She was real. That was the only thing that mattered. Eudaimonics hadn't reinstated her out of goodwill. She knew that. She was on borrowed time. One wrong move, one slip, and they'd cut her loose—send her to the same place they kept people like her father.

She hated them for it, for holding her life in their hands. But she needed them too. Needed the structure, the anchor, even if it felt like a noose tightening around her throat.

The flat stillness of the room pressed against her ears. The city beyond the window was a blur of static light, the towers rising high above the slums like the fingers of some mechanical god.

Then the terminal buzzed.

Her body tensed automatically, conditioned by routine. The sound wasn't just a

notification—it was a priority override, a demand, not a request. She exhaled sharply and reached for the interface on her bedside table. The name flashing on-screen twisted something in her stomach.

INCOMING CALL: Operations Control.

She hesitated—barely a fractional pause—before standing and walking to the kitchen. Then rationality overtook instinct. They wouldn't call unless something was wrong.

She tapped the smooth surface of her wrist terminal, the device no larger than a cuff and flush against her skin. It lit up at her touch, thin bands of soft white light pulsing along its edges. The projection flared to life—small and flickering at first, a miniature figure hovering above her palm. Its edges were sharp, the resolution fine enough to catch the faintest shift of Vance's expression.

With a practiced flick of her fingers, she sent the image sailing into the centre of the room. Ceiling lasers locked onto it instantly, refracting the projection into sharp focus—life-sized, solid enough to cast faint reflections on the polished floor. Vance stood there, hands behind his back, watching her as if he were physically present. His image glitched briefly as the connection stabilised, then straightened—his usual stiff posture settling into place. As she moved, his gaze followed her with that uncanny smoothness, always tracking, like he was really there.

A voice—tight with urgency—broke through the silence.

"Aldrin, you need to get in here."

No greeting. No pleasantries. Just command. The irritation in his voice was routine, as was the implicit expectation of compliance.

She was used to this. She'd been working in Eudaimonics for as long as she could remember and had long since learned how to handle pushy supervisors. She wasn't scared, wasn't intimidated. She knew what she was worth, and she knew nobody

else could do what she did.

She had started studying at a young age, earning a degree in neuroinformatics before going on to complete her PhD and pioneering research in her field. Over the years, her work gained recognition, and when Eudaimonics eventually headhunted her for her industry-leading expertise, she hadn't been surprised. She knew what she was worth, and she knew exactly what she could do.

She sighed, rolling her neck to shake out tension. "What's the problem?"

Vance shifted slightly, adjusting his stance as though impatient. "Mass instability in a tier-three Arc. Collapsed around 0200."

Her frown deepened, fingers drumming once against the counter as she forced the last remnants of sleep from her mind. "How many affected?"

A pause. His projection glitched faintly at the edges, stabilising with a sharp breath, as though even Vance wasn't ready to say it.

"A hundred thousand."

The number cut through the haze.

That was high.

Tier-three Arcs weren't isolated personal simulations; they were shared spaces. A collapse of that magnitude signified either catastrophic system failure—or something deliberate.

She rubbed her cheek, already reaching for her uniform.

"What's the official report?"

Another hesitation. His eyes flicked aside, as if reading something off-screen. A pause just long enough to register.

"Server corruption. AI flagging. Data inconsistencies. Some logs are missing."

Celeste froze.

Missing logs.

Eudaimonics had layered redundancies, fail-safes upon fail-safes. Even in extreme failure scenarios, the system always recorded preceding events.

Which meant—

Someone had tampered with it.

She didn't like that.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Survivors?"

Vance's projection shifted again, crossing his arms—a gesture too polished to be casual, rehearsed in that corporate way he had.

"Five."

Her exhale was sharp, controlled. But her hand twitched—a reflex, like a stray pulse through her fingers.

Five.

The number snagged on something in her mind, catching like a thorn she couldn't dislodge. She pressed her palm flat against her thigh, grounding herself in the pressure.

"Five out of a hundred thousand," she repeated aloud, forcing her voice steady.

Her headache pulsed behind her eyes. This was not how she wanted to start her day.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, exhaling through her teeth.

"Give me thirty minutes."

Vance said nothing—his image glitched once more at the edges. He turned as if to walk away, the projection beginning to stride toward nothing—then blinked out mid-step, vanishing without acknowledgment.

Celeste let out a slow breath, then moved.

Looking out the carriage window she could smell the stink of the train platform. Old metal, ozone, and bodies packed too tightly for too long. The carriage itself was old—rusted joints groaning with every shift of weight. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting everything in pale, sickly hues. Paper scraps and food cartons littered the floor, sliding lazily with the train's motion, pushed along by the shuffle of tired commuters. Holo-ads sputtered overhead, promising synthetic peace to people who couldn't afford real relief.

Beyond the station's crumbling walls, the city rose in jagged layers—slums bleeding into the towering spires of Eudaimonics, glass and steel untouched by the rot below.

She leaned against the cold metal pole, arms crossed, fingers digging into her sleeves like she could hold herself together if she just pressed hard enough. The train swayed beneath her feet, a soft, rhythmic clatter that grated against her nerves.

She caught her own reflection in the grime-smeared window—pale, drawn, not quite herself. But for a moment—just a flicker—there was someone standing behind her.

Dark suit.

Black eyes.

Her chest tightened.

She turned sharply, heart thudding against her ribs. Nothing. Just the same tired commuters staring at nothing, sunk into their own miseries.

Just fatigue, she told herself. Residual dream junk. That's all.

The city blurred past in a haze of weathered concrete, rusted scaffolding, and half-lit signs flickering in the morning gloom. Buildings loomed, stacked too close together, their facades stained with years of neglect. Gutters overflowed with stagnant water, catching the dim glow of malfunctioning streetlights.

Nothing was broken enough to fix.

Nothing was clean enough to feel new.

The roads were still functional—barely. Patches of hastily poured asphalt covered old potholes, the repairs cracking at the edges. Autonomous vehicles rumbled past, dented from years of careless impacts, their exteriors coated in a layer of grime that no one bothered to scrub off.

Everything about the city felt like it had been built too fast, too cheaply, then left to rot.

A transit hub flashed by—rows of exhausted workers lined up for biometric scans, shuffling forward under the watchful red glow of overhead security lights. Their movements were automatic, practiced. The system didn't need guards. Compliance was built into the design. It was like the designers wanted people to move to the Arcs.

Celeste barely noticed.

She had lived in this world long enough to stop seeing it.

But her fingers kept tightening around her sleeve, and her eyes didn't leave the window until the train hissed to a stop at the corporate sector.

By the time she reached the Eudaimonics' control building, the headache behind her eyes had anchored itself—dull, persistent, and unrelenting. The dream still clung to her thoughts—distant, but not gone.

She pushed it aside. There was work to do.

Celeste halted at the base of the stairs, her gaze lifting to the building's entrance—a cylindrical revolving door, designed for seamless movement, allowing one person to enter as another exits. Celeste adjusted the cuffs of her coat, the smooth fabric cool under her fingers, and watched her reflection in the mirrored panel of the handrails leading up the stairs. She looked... normal. Rested. Unbothered.

She flicked her gaze downward and thumbed at the ID badge clipped to her coat.

Dr. Celeste Aldrin – System Operations

Clearance: Level Five

System Operations – Arc Stability.

Eudaimonics had thousands of employees, but only a handful of them understood what actually kept the system running—and she was one of them.

If an Arc collapsed, she was the one who figured out why. If there was instability, she caught it before anyone noticed.

At least, she used to. Before they pulled her in. Before everything changed.

The title still carried weight. Still felt... important. It wasn't just a job. It was authority. It was trust, however leached it may be.

And trust, at Eudaimonics, was everything.

The fatigue from her morning melted away, replaced by something effortless. Polished.

Apathy sat heavy in her chest, like a weight pressing her ribs inward, making every step feel sluggish. It dulled the edges of everything—muting urgency, softening fear, making even anger feel distant. Most of the time, she didn't care. She just went through the motions.

She climbed the steps, staring at her feet as she moved, the monotony of it grounding in its own way. One after another, deliberate, heavy. The weight of her mind grew with each step, pressing harder into her spine, coiling in her ribs.

At the top, she exhaled and pushed the rotating door, the motion smooth, automatic. The glass curved around her as she stepped through, and then—

The Eudaimonics Systems Division.

The lobby was a masterpiece of corporate efficiency—not just in function, but in control. Glass, steel, and seamless integration, polished to an almost unnatural perfection. Nothing out of place. Nothing unnecessary.

The space dictated behaviour without a word. The lighting, neither too harsh nor too soft, adjusted subtly as employees moved, ensuring no shadows lingered too long. The floor—smooth, reflective—offered no place to pause without standing out. Even the air itself was calibrated. Slightly higher oxygen levels—never enough to notice, just enough to matter. Employees moved with focus, their minds sharp, their fatigue blunted before it could settle. The oxygen caused an increase in respiration efficiency leading to subconscious urgency. Conversations were clipped, purposeful. No one lingered.

Every path had a purpose. Walkways curved just enough to funnel traffic, subtly discouraging deviation. The reception desk, positioned at the exact mathematical centre of the space, ensured that every arrival was acknowledged, accounted for, seen.

No one loitered. No one needed to be told where to go. The design made hesitation feel unnatural.

This wasn't just a building. It was a system.

A system that didn't command.

It suggested.

And suggestion was more powerful than force.

Though it didn't do anything to the weight that constantly pressed her chest.

The oxygen kept her mind sharp. It didn't make her want to be here.

Celeste adjusted her coat again, squared her shoulders, and kept walking.

But then—

"Dr. Aldrin!"

A warm voice called out, and Celeste turned on reflex.

"Samson," she greeted smoothly as a man in maintenance fatigues approached, wiping his hands on a rag. "What's the damage today?"

Samson grinned, shaking his head. "Oh, you know, just the usual. Someone tried to

reroute the cooling flow to the east servers again—fried half the circuit board before realising they should probably check their numbers first. If they had only asked, we could have stopped this before it began. But they never do."

Celeste winced. "Amateurs."

He barked a laugh. "Right? Anyway, should have it patched up before midday. You settling back in alright?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Just another day."

It wasn't.

Three weeks ago, she had been pulled from this very building, escorted out by internal security without explanation. She spent six days in Eudaimonics custody, locked in an interrogation room, bombarded with the same questions on repeat.

Who had she spoken to?

Had she been approached by anyone unusual?

Was she aware her credentials had been flagged?

She answered truthfully. No. No. No.

They didn't believe her—never told her what she had done. They never presented evidence. Just the same quiet, methodical questioning, the same impassive stares, the same silence between her answers.

Then, just as abruptly as she had been taken, they let her go.

"Two weeks off to recover."

Not a suspension. Not a punishment. Just... a break. As if they expected her to slot right back in after everything.

Samson gave her a curious look, as if considering pressing further.

Does he know?

But before she could find out, a call over his earpiece distracted him. He gave her a quick wave before heading off.

Celeste exhaled, rolling the tension from her shoulders as she stepped deeper into the atrium.

It felt the same. The same quiet efficiency, the same measured conversations, the same subtle urgency in everyone's stride.

No stares. No hesitation.

No sign that anything had changed.

But it had.

She had sat in a windowless room for six days, being questioned like she had joined the rebels herself. Surely the intelligence spooks had to know she was barely holding on—so how could they believe she'd joined the terrorist organisation aiming to bring down the very system she fought to save?

Now she was back, and the world absorbed her without friction, as if nothing had happened.

She caught a few waves, a couple of quick smiles. Too normal.

Like she was supposed to believe it.

Like she was supposed to forget.

She forced herself to move forward.

She thought she saw the security cameras tracking her as she moved, lenses shifting to follow her path. But then she shook it off—just her mind playing tricks. Or maybe she only thought she saw it.

If they were watching, she wouldn't give them anything to see.

Mira was waiting by the entrance to the analysis wing, arms crossed, tablet clutched against her chest like a shield.

"Celeste," she said, whistling under her breath as she looked her over. "You look like hell. Rough night, or just trying out a new aesthetic?"

Celeste huffed a quiet laugh but didn't meet her gaze.

Mira smiled—soft, warm, one that almost reached her eyes. The kind of smile that felt like home.

"Hey, this takes a very particular set of skills," Celeste muttered, stepping back and leaning slightly, her hands running down the line of her black suit like she was showing it off. She laughed, soft but real enough to ease some of the tension between them.

Mira reached out, brushing Celeste's shoulder, fingers curling slightly in the fabric like she wasn't ready to let go.

The contact was grounding, and she hated how much she needed it—how much she missed it when Mira wasn't there.

"I tried to call you," Mira said, softer now, her voice carrying that note of worry she only ever used when they were alone. "You didn't answer."

Celeste gave a half-shrug, her eyes fixed on the floor. "Had things to deal with."

"Alone, apparently," Mira murmured.

Celeste's lips twitched, but she didn't look up. "It's easier."

Mira tilted her head, watching her. "Since when do you care about easier?"

Celeste finally glanced sideways, her gaze sharp but tired. "Since everything started falling apart."

For a long moment, Mira didn't say anything. She just looked at her, reading between the lines the way only she could.

"You don't have to do this alone," Mira said quietly, her hand still resting lightly on Celeste's arm. "Not with me."

Celeste swallowed, throat tight. "I know."

Mira gave her a small smile, soft at the edges. "You're still coming over tonight, right? You know I won't let you wriggle out of that."

Celeste hesitated—then nodded. "Yeah. I'll be there."

Mira's smile warmed a little more, and she gave a small squeeze to Celeste's arm before letting go. "Good. I'm ordering food, and you're not allowed to argue."

A flicker of something passed over Celeste's face—something close to relief.

"Deal," she said quietly.

Mira bumped her shoulder gently as they started walking, falling into step beside her.

"Maybe we'll even watch that terrible show you love so much," Mira teased, her voice lighter now, though her eyes still watched Celeste closely.

Celeste snorted. "Yeah, well. Somebody's gotta have bad taste around here."

They reached the hallway to the operations wing, Mira's arm brushing against Celeste's as they walked. Neither of them moved away.

Mira nudged her again, playful now. "Come on. Vance is in there, glaring at his screens like a rejected Bond villain. Let's not keep him waiting."

"Since when do you care about Vance's mood?" Celeste snorted, using the same argument Mira had earlier.

"I don't," Mira grinned. "But I do care about you."

Celeste blinked at her, chest tightening in a way she couldn't quite name.

Mira glanced sideways at her. "Any news on your dad?"

Celeste's fingers twitched. She kept her expression smooth. "Still in the facility. They adjusted his meds again."

"Shit," Mira said softly, her teasing mask slipping for just a second. "I'm sorry, Cel."

Celeste nodded, throat too tight to answer.

Mira studied her a moment longer, her smile returning gently. "Hey... You know you can crash at mine for a bit, or—whatever. Just say the word." Mira grinned, starting to move toward the doors leading into Operations. But then Celeste's wrist comm buzzed again, breaking the moment.

The sharp ping of the priority alert echoed between them.

Celeste glanced down at the screen, her lips twisting into a wry smirk as she flicked her eyes toward Mira.

"They're playing our song," she muttered dryly, holding up her wrist so Mira could see the glowing alert.

Mira huffed a soft laugh through her nose, shaking her head. "Romantic as always."

Celeste quirked a brow. "You know me. Nothing says quality time like catastrophic system failure."

Mira gave her a playful nudge with her elbow, though her eyes lingered on Celeste's face a little longer than the joke deserved, like she was searching for cracks in her calm.

"Guess we'd better dance, then," Mira said, her smile softening as she turned toward the door.

Celeste exhaled a breath she hadn't realised she was holding and fell into step beside her.

Mira caught her hand as they turned to walk—just a small squeeze, but grounding.

"I'll stay close," Mira said quietly. She glanced at Celeste sideways, her voice softer again. "Hey... I've got you, okay?"

Celeste didn't answer right away. But as they stopped in front of the door, she nodded.

"I know," she whispered.

And for the first time that morning, her chest eased just enough to breathe.

Celeste moved quickly, weaving through the atrium and toward the security

checkpoint.

"Morning, Dr. Aldrin," the guard at the station greeted her with an easy smile, briefly acknowledging Mira with a curt nod. "You're looking sharp today."

"Reyes," Celeste returned smoothly, already unhooking her ID badge. "You just say that because I'm not in maintenance scrubs like the rest of you."

He chuckled, scanning her badge. "You wound me, Doc. But yeah, we can't all pull off corporate black like you."

Celeste smirked. "I know how comfortable your scrubs are." She shot him a wink. "You're going to have to pinch me a pair."

Reyes chuckled, "I'll see what I can do."

Celeste swiped her ID and stepped through the scanner. The system buzzed red.

Celeste stopped.

Mira, a step behind her, froze too—her easy smile vanishing as her hand twitched closer to Celeste's arm.

The red light blinked once. Twice.

Celeste stared at it, her pulse tightening in her throat.

The buzz lasted a fraction longer than normal before the green light flicked on. The console chirped. A pause. Like it had to think about it first.

ACCESS GRANTED: Dr. Celeste Aldrin – System Operations

Mira exhaled, then leaned in and casually swiped her own ID. The scanner gave a smoother chime this time, clearing her without hesitation.

"You good?" Mira asked under her breath, too low for anyone else to hear.

Celeste forced a smile, though her chest was tight. "Yeah," she said. "Fine."

But neither of them moved right away.

Finally, Mira stepped forward first, giving Celeste a small nudge to follow.

Reyes raised a brow but didn't comment, glancing back at his terminal like nothing had happened

Celeste fell into step beside Mira, not saying a word.

Reyes muttered something under his breath, but the humour in his face had faded slightly. "System's being glitchy today."

Celeste nodded, filing the moment away. Systems didn't glitch. Not here. Not here.

She pushed through the checkpoint, past the secondary doors, and into the heart of Eudaimonics' operations centre.

By the time they reached the core operations hub, the greetings had faded into the usual buzz of quiet efficiency.

The collapse would be logged here.

She stepped through the final security door into the control room, the hiss of pressurised locks sealing behind her. A security guard stood just outside, cradling some kind of compact machine gun, his eyes sharp but disinterested, like he'd been standing there too long to care.

Inside, the air was cooler. A stillness surrounded them. Mira walked off in front of Celeste to a terminal halfway through the room and took a knee next to the analyst.

The front wall was dominated by a single massive screen, digitally segmented into dozens of smaller displays. Streams of cascading data, collapsing code, simulation snapshots, and looping error logs scrolled endlessly—fragments of the Arc breakdown still unresolved.

Occasionally, several screens would merge into a larger composite, data syncing in real-time, while at other times, individual frames would pull forward from the wall, projected into three-dimensional holograms by ceiling-mounted lasers.

In the middle of the room, an analyst stood alone, slowly rotating one of the holographic displays, reviewing the data from every angle—flicking between layers, dissecting corrupted sequences, as if searching for something just out of reach. These were snapshots of the Arc Vance had called her in about.

Celeste stood at the side entrance, near the top tier of the room. The whole space was built like an auditorium, three wide tiers descending in a gentle curve toward the enormous bank of screens. The floor followed the curve, each level stepping down in neat arcs, semi-circular and perfectly engineered to focus everyone's attention forward.

Above the tiers, nestled like a glass observation deck, was the upper office—suspended slightly forward to give a full view of the room below. Vance stood inside, locked in a heated conversation with someone Celeste hadn't expected to see.

The Director.

He was dressed in sleek, modern minimalism—dark slacks and a simple black turtleneck, sharp lines against a deceptively casual stance. Arms crossed, but his body language was loose, relaxed, as though he had all the time in the world.

Vance looked agitated, shoulders tight as he gestured sharply. But the Director only listened, head tilted, watching him intently.

From her vantage point, Celeste could only see the Director's back—broad, still, controlled.

Then Vance glanced across and spotted her.

His expression flickered—relief, frustration, maybe both.

A moment later, the Director turned.

His gaze found her immediately. His arms unfolded with easy grace, one hand reaching out to rest on Vance's arm, just above the elbow, for a moment. It was a

light touch—familiar, but also a signal. Something in that moment passed between them.

Then the Director stepped back, turning to leave. He moved past Vance without another word, but as he reached the edge of the glass office, he looked back over his shoulder at her.

And smiled.

Not cold or calculated—kind. Almost gentle.

Celeste felt a knot tighten in her chest, unsure why that simple look unsettled her more than the data streams below.

With a final glance, the Director walked away, vanishing down a corridor that led deeper into the private wing.

Vance didn't wait long. He raised a hand, waving her up toward the glass office.

Celeste swallowed and moved to climb the steps, her pulse tightening as the weight of the collapsing Arc and the Director's gaze lingered behind her.

Celeste stepped toward the office, instinctively checking the status feeds scrolling across the displays.

0.03% deviation. Minor. Within tolerance.

But there—just barely—was something off. A flicker in the Arc's baseline sync, not enough to trigger an alert, but enough to catch her eye.

You don't work in system stability without developing a gut instinct for when things are about to go to hell. She didn't have access to deep diagnostics anymore—not since her "time off." But still, old habits died hard.

Celeste stood at the entrance to the office, a glass door separating her from the space beyond. She drew in a slow breath, holding it for a moment before exhaling — steady, controlled, making sure that when she stepped inside, she would wear her usual air of leadership and composure like armour.

As she pushed the door open and crossed the threshold, Vance turned to face her, his expression carefully unreadable. "Aldrin," he said.

Celeste crossed her arms. "What happened?"

Vance exhaled, tapping on a terminal. "Standard failure. One of the servers destabilised. Caused a chain reaction in the Arc."

Celeste didn't blink. "Server instability doesn't erase logs."

Vance's gaze didn't waver. "We're still investigating."

Celeste narrowed her eyes.

"That's not an answer, Vance."

Celeste was one of the few people in the building who had both the authority and the spine to speak her mind — and she never hesitated to do so. With her clearance, her skillset, and her reputation, Vance should have been used to her calling him out on his bullshit by now.

His jaw twitched, a flicker of irritation crossing his face before he smoothed it back into that usual, unreadable calm. He held her gaze.

Vance had always been difficult to read—polished, controlled, a veteran of corporate damage control. He knew how to say just enough without ever saying anything at all.

But Celeste had a knack for reading him, and she wasn't about to let him slip past her now.

"I'm not stalling," Vance finally said, voice smooth, carefully measured. "We're gathering more data."

Celeste crossed her arms, shifting her weight to one foot. "That's not what I asked."

Vance inhaled through his nose, slow and deliberate. He was weighing his words. Calculating.

Finally, he turned to the main display, gesturing toward the cascading data streams. The collapse logs flickered across the screen—system timestamps, Arc diagnostics, termination reports.

"This is what we know," he said. "At 0203, Arc 92A destabilised. The server

reported multiple cascading failures in real-time, all originating from a single sector. By 0207, the integrity threshold dropped below five percent, triggering a full collapse."

Celeste narrowed her eyes. "What was the trigger?"

Vance hesitated, just for a second. "That's the problem. We don't know."

She frowned. "What do you mean you don't know? The system should have flagged the initial point of failure."

"It didn't."

Celeste glanced at the data. The log files scrolled automatically, lines of code flashing across the screen, but something was wrong. There was a gap—an absence in the data where the trigger should have been. It wasn't just a missing log. The system had overwritten something.

"You're saying the logs were erased."

Vance didn't react. He didn't have to.

Celeste turned back to him, the pieces starting to align in her mind. "Someone tampered with the data."

Vance exhaled through his nose. "We're still looking into it."

"That's not a denial."

His expression didn't shift, but the silence was answer enough.

Celeste's stomach twisted. This wasn't just a system failure. Someone had deliberately erased the point of origin—either to cover something up or to ensure no one could trace what had happened.

"How many survivors?" she asked, already knowing what was coming.

"Five."

She continued to stare at him.

Vance inclined his head slightly. "They're unstable."

Of course they were. No one should have survived a collapse like that. The human mind wasn't built to withstand sudden reality fragmentation. Anyone who did make it out would be suffering cognitive dissonance, memory fractures—if not worse.

"I need to speak to them," Celeste said firmly.

Vance's expression didn't change, but his posture did—just slightly. A subtle shift. A flicker of hesitation before the mask slipped back into place.

"They're in isolation," he said. "Standard protocol."

Celeste knew exactly what that meant—containment, evaluation, and endless rounds of cognitive stability testing. But it also meant restriction. If someone wanted to bury the truth, isolation was the easiest way to keep survivors quiet.

"That wasn't a request, Vance," she said sharply. "I'm going to talk to them before they degrade any further. And I want Mira."

She turned from the glass wall, fixing him with a steady gaze, arms crossing with deliberate finality. They stood eye to eye, and Celeste carried herself with the kind of confidence that filled any gap. If it rattled him, Vance didn't show it.

"I want a psychologist," she added, voice cool but firm.

Vance looked away, scanning the empty auditorium beyond the glass. "She's not qualified to—"

"She's the best you have."

He turned back, but Celeste held his gaze, unblinking. "Tell me I'm wrong."

A long pause. Then Vance exhaled through his nose and gave a sharp nod. "Fine. But get some early information from the technician first."

"I want access to everything," she said, not missing a beat.

Vance's eyes hardened. "No." His tone left no room for argument. "Not unless things get worse."

Celeste didn't push.

Not yet.



Chapter 2

As soon as they stepped into the hallway, Mira fell into step beside Celeste, glancing sideways at her.

"So," Mira said lightly, though her fingers gripped her tablet tighter than necessary, "you want me there for the interviews?"

Celeste didn't look at her right away. Her mind was already turning over the logistics —what she needed to ask, what she needed to see.

"Yes," she said, tone clipped. "I need someone in the room who can read them better than I can."

Mira hesitated. "I'm not—" she gave a small shrug, adjusting her grip on the tablet, "—I'm not sure I'm qualified for this. I mean, I've never been on a survivor case before."

Celeste finally glanced at her, softening slightly.

"That's why I want you," she said. "You're not like the others. You'll see what I can't. What they're too afraid to say out loud."

Mira exhaled, a flicker of a smile on her lips, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I've seen you handle the boardroom, Cel. I've even seen you pull rank on Vance. But I've never seen you... like this."

Celeste tilted her head, brow arching. "Like what?"

Mira looked away, chewing on her lip. "Like... boss-mode. Full-on cold and calculating. It's a little terrifying, to be honest."

Celeste stopped walking, turning to face her.

"It's not about being cold," she said quietly. "It's about getting to them before they break. Before their minds twist everything that happened beyond recognition. You know what survivors look like after a week in isolation. You've seen the reports."

Mira nodded slowly, her jaw tight.

"I don't want them medicated out of coherence before I can get to them. I want you to read them as they are, not after the system's scrubbed them into compliance."

Mira let out a breath. "You think it's that bad?"

Celeste's eyes were sharp, focused. "Five people made it out of a tier-three Arc collapse. Alive. That's impossible. Something kept them alive—and I want to know what."

Mira swallowed. "And what if they don't remember?"

"Then we figure out what's left," Celeste said. "Even fractured memories leave traces."

Mira exhaled and gave a small nod, though her fingers still twitched against her tablet.

"And what do you want from me?" she asked quietly.

Celeste's gaze softened, though her voice didn't lose its edge.

"I want you to tell me when they're lying. When they're breaking. And when they're hiding something even they don't realise."

Mira's eyes flicked up to hers, holding the weight of that expectation.

"And if they're dangerous?"

Celeste hesitated for just a moment—then her jaw set.

"Then I'll deal with it."

Mira searched her face for a beat longer. Celeste showed no emotion. Mira nodding.

"Okay."

Celeste turned back toward the hallway, her stride steady, purposeful.

"You'll do fine," she said, glancing over her shoulder with a ghost of a smile.

Mira let out a quiet, shaky laugh as she fell into step beside her again. "Yeah, well... you might be used to walking into fire, but I like to have a plan."

Celeste's grin widened just a fraction.

"Plans fall apart."

Mira shook her head but smiled, her nerves settling a little. "You're impossible."

"Not impossible," Celeste murmured as they approached the observation deck.
"Just prepared."

Celeste clenched her jaw. This wasn't just a standard interview. She knew it. Mira knew it. The guards posted outside the isolation chamber knew it.

Celeste paused at the reinforced door, scanning her ID against the panel. A heavy mechanical hiss sounded as the doors parted.

Celeste approached the technician standing in the airlock by the viewing window, his attention fixed on the tablet in his hands. Mira trailed quietly at her side, her eyes darting between Celeste and the glass beyond them.

The technician glanced up as they approached, clearly surprised. "Dr. Aldrin. I wasn't expecting anyone this early."

Celeste offered a small, professional smile, her tone light and pleasant. "I wanted to check in before we begin. I thought you might have some insights that aren't written down yet."

He hesitated, fingers shifting awkwardly over his tablet. "We're still compiling everything. The reports aren't... complete."

"I understand," Celeste said smoothly, her voice easy but precise. "That's alright. I'm more interested in what you've seen so far. Anything I should be aware of before I go in there?"

The technician relaxed slightly at her tone, nodding.

"It's a mess. Cognitive fractures across all of them." His fingers twitched against the edge of the tablet, uneasy. "Three of them are completely unresponsive—just sitting there, staring at nothing. Dissociated. Vitals are steady, streaming to the monitors on the walls like they should be, but..." He hesitated, glancing toward the glass. "It doesn't mean they're present."

He shifted, adjusting his grip on the tablet.

"The woman on the right won't stop talking—just... nonsense. Fragments of sentences, like she's stuck in a loop. Keeps muttering things we can't make sense of."

His eyes flicked toward the last man—Matthew—then back to Celeste, voice dropping lower.

"And him—Matthew. He hasn't spoken once. Just sits there, watching. Calm. Too calm."

The tech swallowed. "We can't read him. The others are gone, but he's... aware. Following every movement. Like he's waiting for something. And no one wants to get close enough to find out what."

He looked down at the tablet, scrolling through the data streaming from the isolation room. "Vitals are normal for all five. Everything looks fine on paper. But it's not fine in there."

Celeste's jaw tightened as she followed his gaze to the screen—numbers scrolling smoothly, heart rates steady, brainwaves still active.

"If you're going to start anywhere," the technician murmured, glancing back toward the window, "start with him. Far left."

He hesitated before adding, voice tight: "Just... be careful with him."

Celeste nodded thoughtfully, her gaze flicking to the blurred figures beyond the glass.

"No aggression? No direct threats?" she asked, calm and measured.

"Nothing like that," the tech confirmed.

Celeste considered that, hands loosely clasped in front of her.

"I'll need all the current files sent to Vance. Even if they're incomplete."

The technician hesitated again, glancing down at his tablet. "We haven't had time to—"

Celeste's voice remained steady, polite—but there was no mistaking the quiet authority beneath her words. "I don't need them polished. Just send what you have. I prefer to work with partial information over none."

She paused, watching him with a calm, expectant gaze. "Please forward them as soon as possible."

There was a moment of stillness before the technician nodded. "Of course, Dr. Aldrin. I'll send them now."

Celeste gave a faint smile, dipping her head slightly in thanks. "I appreciate it."

As he turned away, Mira let out a soft exhale, stepping closer to Celeste's side. "You always do that?" she asked quietly, a hint of amusement in her voice.

Celeste arched a brow, her expression unreadable. "Do what?"

Mira huffed a quiet laugh. "Sound like you're being polite, but somehow make people feel like they don't have a choice."

Celeste's mouth twitched—almost a smile. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Mira shook her head with a smirk. "Remind me not to get on your bad side."

Celeste glanced at the window again, her face settling into something more focused. "Let's hope no one in there does either."

She gave Mira a brief nod, and together, they turned toward the entrance to the isolation chamber.

The door to the observation room hissed open, and Celeste led Mira inside, the sound of it sealing behind them like a final note of warning.

The five survivors sat scattered along the curved bench inside—though sat was a

generous word for what some of them were doing. A woman on the far right rocked gently, arms wrapped around herself, her eyes darting at things only she could see. Another stared blankly ahead, unmoving.

But it was Matthew who caught Mira's attention.

Celeste stayed back, pausing just inside the door. She reached across to a clipboard attached to the wall with 'Matthew' written on the top. She returned to watching. Measuring. She had no intention of rushing this. Mira needed to do her part—establish contact, make a read.

Mira glanced back at Celeste, who gave a slight nod. Go ahead.

Squaring her shoulders, Mira stepped forward, careful to keep her posture relaxed, unthreatening. She crouched in front of Matthew, keeping her eyes on his.

"Hey," she said gently, her voice soft but clear. "Matthew, right? My name's Mira. I'm here to help you. Can we talk for a bit?"

Matthew's eyes flicked to hers, hollow and distant, but there was still something there. A spark of recognition. His hands twitched in his lap, fingers curling in tight, restless movements.

Mira offered a small, encouraging smile, settling herself cross-legged on the floor in front of him, giving him space but also focus. "You've been through something rough, haven't you?" she murmured. "It's alright. You're safe now."

From her place near the door, Celeste watched carefully, arms loosely crossed. She wasn't interfering—not yet. But her eyes stayed locked on Matthew, reading every twitch, every flicker of expression. Watching for what Mira hadn't seen yet.

Matthew's breathing grew heavier, but he kept his gaze on Mira. His lips parted like he wanted to say something, but no sound came.

"You don't have to speak if you're not ready," Mira said, her voice soft as a whisper. "But if you can tell me anything about what happened, it would help us understand. Help you."

Matthew blinked slowly, and Mira smiled gently. "I know it feels like you're alone in this, but you're not. We're right here."

Celeste tilted her head slightly, narrowing her eyes. Something was off. The way Matthew's pupils were dilating, too slow to adjust to the light. His body held just a little too still—like it was waiting.

Then—

Matthew's eyes shifted.

Not a normal blink. Not a flicker of emotion. Just a sharp, smooth shift. His irises deepened into endless black, swallowing all colour—drinking in the light until nothing remained. The contrast against the whites of his eyes was stark, unnatural.

Too sharp.

Too wrong.

Celeste's posture sharpened instantly.

Mira hadn't seen it yet—she was still speaking gently, leaning closer, trying to reach him.

"Matthew," Mira whispered. "You don't have to be afraid."

Celeste stepped forward, calm and deliberate, her hand loosely gripping the backrest of a chair she'd picked up near the door. She carried it with easy confidence, as though she simply intended to sit—like she had all the time in the world. But in truth, she wanted something solid within reach. Something that could be a weapon if it came to that. She spoke up, her voice quiet but cutting through the air like a blade. "That's enough, Mira."

Mira blinked, glancing over her shoulder. Confusion flickered in her eyes, but she read Celeste's expression—serious, locked-down control—and she didn't argue.

Celeste kept her focus on Matthew as she stepped smoothly in front of Mira, taking her place without a word. She set the chair down with a soft scrape against the floor and lowered herself into it, her posture relaxed, casual even—but every inch of her was alert, watching him closely.

The chair sat three metres away—just enough distance to be safe, but close enough to hold his attention.

"Hello, Matthew," Celeste said, her voice smooth, almost conversational—but there was an edge to it, sharp as glass under velvet.

Matthew's eyes fixed on her, following her movements.

"You know who I am, don't you?" she asked quietly, tilting her head.

Matthew didn't answer.

Behind her, Mira slowly moved back to the edge of the room—silent now, watching.

Celeste's gaze never left Matthew's face.

"You've been inside an Arc," she said softly, carefully. "You saw what happened."

Matthew's hands twitched again, but he didn't speak.

Celeste leaned in slightly, her eyes sharp, watching for the smallest flicker of reaction.

"You know why I'm here."

Matthew blinked—slow, deliberate, like some part of him was trying to resist.

"Let's try this again. From the beginning...I'm Dr. Celeste Aldrin," she said evenly. "System Operations – Arc Stability. My job is to make sure your world doesn't collapse under your feet. If it does, I find out what happened to make the Arc collapse."

She watched his eyes the entire time. He just looked back.

Unblinking. Waiting.

She adjusted her grip on the clipboard, skimming over the printed details before glancing back up.

"Matthew, do you know what an Arc is?"

Silence.

Most people didn't. Most people forgot. The process of integration was intense and most people block out even the possibility of another existence.

Celeste softened her tone, speaking as if explaining it to someone for the very first time.

"An Arc is a world. A digital reality where people live after transferring in. But it isn't like a simulation, where you plug in and then leave." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "Your consciousness is uploaded permanently. Everything inside—the places, the people, the lives—it all feels real, but it's not like us."

His breathing didn't change, his expression still unreadable.

"When people transfer into an Arc, they don't come back. You weren't just inside the Arc, Matthew. You lived there. Your memories, your experiences—everything you knew—was part of it."

Still, nothing.

"You survived something that should have killed you," Celeste continued, voice low, calm, but unyielding. "That makes you special. But it also makes you dangerous, doesn't it?"

"You were inside," she continued. "A full transfer. Not a connection. Not a simulation."

A pause. A test.

No reaction.

She leaned closer, elbows on her knees, clipboard still in hand.

"You woke up. That doesn't happen." Her tone remained clinical, detached. "Arcs don't fail like that. Not unless something made it happen."

His lips twitched. Not quite a smile—something colder.

Celeste smiled faintly, but there was no warmth in it. "You're not the first survivor I've spoken to. And you won't be the last. So let's not pretend you don't understand me."

Matthew's black eyes glinted, head tilting as if studying her. Like he was deciding how much to give away.

Behind her, Mira was watching—silent but tense, arms folded, jaw tight.

Celeste's gaze never wavered.

"If you want to play games," she said, soft but razor-edged, "that's fine. But know this—if there's something inside you, something left behind from the collapse, I will find it."

Matthew blinked slowly.

She inhaled slowly, steadyng herself. This next part would break him.

Her eyes dropped to the clipboard.

There, listed under Next of Kin—Catherine Holt. His wife.

Beside her name, in a smaller section—two more.

Celeste swallowed, barely audible.

"Matthew," she said calculated, glancing up again. "Catherine—your wife—and your children..." She flicked her eyes back down, ensuring she got their names right.

"Ellie. Oliver."

She met his gaze again.

"They didn't survive the collapse. They're dead."

For the first time, something shifted in his expression.

A flicker. A ripple across the surface. A twitch in his head.

Celeste didn't look away. Didn't rush.

The words hung between them, weightless yet heavy, waiting for a place to land.

The black-eyed man's gaze didn't shift. Not quite watching her—watching something just beyond her.

Celeste smiled again, more genuine this time—but still sharp enough to cut. "Let's make this simple. Tell me what you saw."

Matthew's lips twitched again, and when he finally spoke, his voice was rough, like it hadn't been used in a long time.

"Which part?" he whispered, a shadow of a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Celeste's brows knotted slightly, but her smile remained. Calm. Controlled.

"All of it," she said quietly.

Mira, standing behind her, exhaled a slow breath. Watching Celeste work—this Celeste—was like seeing a completely different person. How she imagined Hannibal Lecture. The woman who spent nights on Mira's couch, quiet and tired, was gone. This version was precise. Dangerous.

As the tension thickened, Mira took a careful step closer, her voice soft but steady, directed at Celeste. "You want me to stay in here?"

Celeste didn't look away from Matthew. "Yes."

Matthew's black eyes flicked between them—watching, calculating.

Celeste smiled again, that cold, professional calm never cracking.

"Because we've only just started."

Matthew's gaze didn't waver. If anything, he seemed almost amused by her words, that faint curl still ghosting at the corner of his mouth.

Celeste let the silence linger for a moment longer, weighing him, letting him think.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Matthew," she said finally, her voice softening just enough to be believable. "I'm here to understand what happened to you. To all of them."

His eyes flicked—just barely—to the others in the room. Like he was checking they were still there.

Or making sure they weren't listening.

Celeste leaned back slightly, shifting her weight. Casual, but deliberate. "You know what a collapse means, don't you?"

Matthew didn't move.

She pressed on, voice measured, like she was talking to a cornered animal she didn't want to spook.

"It means the Arc failed. Everything inside fell apart. People died. Thousands of them." She let the word hang. "But not you. You made it out."

A flicker of something in his eyes—gone too fast to read.

Celeste leaned forward again, elbows resting on her knees. "That doesn't happen by accident, Matthew."

He blinked. Slow. Too slow.

Behind her, Mira shifted uncomfortably, watching the exchange.

"You know what I think?" Celeste asked, voice quieter now. She let the words sink into the space between them. "I think you saw something in there. Something that wasn't supposed to exist."

Matthew's lips twitched again. A flash of teeth that wasn't quite a smile.

Celeste's voice stayed even, calm, but there was steel beneath every word. "You're not the only person to survive an Arc collapse, Matthew. But you're the only one they're afraid to talk to."

His head tilted slightly, black eyes glimmering under the fluorescent lights. "Is that why you're here?" he asked, voice low, rough

Celeste smiled faintly. "I'm here because I want answers."

Matthew's gaze swept over her, searching. "And what if you don't like what you find?"

Celeste didn't flinch. "Then I'll deal with it."

Silence stretched between them, charged and heavy.

Finally, Matthew exhaled, like some of the tension was bleeding out of him.

"You want to know what I saw?" he asked quietly.

Celeste nodded once. "Yes."

His fingers twitched again, restless, curling tighter.

"I saw... the edge," he whispered.

Celeste frowned slightly. "The edge of what?"

Matthew's eyes lifted, fixing on her, and for the first time, there was a glimmer of fear in his gaze.

"Of everything."

Mira inhaled sharply behind her, and Celeste's fingers tightened subtly around her clipboard.

"Be specific," Celeste said, voice still calm, but more insistent now.

Matthew's breathing grew uneven, his hands flexing and curling.

"It wasn't supposed to be there," he murmured, almost to himself. "The cracks in the sky. The walls that weren't walls anymore. Like something had peeled it open from the inside—like something was watching."

Celeste's spine stiffened.

"What was watching?" she asked softly.

Matthew's gaze dropped, but Celeste could still see his eyes, shadowed and distant. His shoulders were tense, drawn in tight. "I don't know. I tried to look away, but it was—" He broke off, shaking his head, the words lost somewhere between fear and memory.

Celeste waited. Watching. Measuring.

Matthew's hands dug into his knees, fingers white-knuckled.

"It was everywhere," he whispered. "In the walls. In the people. In me."

His voice cracked on the last word, and for a moment, Celeste saw through the black-eyed mask—saw the terrified man buried underneath.

"Whatever it was," he said, quieter still, "it got out."

Celeste didn't move. Didn't blink. But inside, her pulse thudded sharp against her ribs.

She kept her voice even, threading steel through every word. "What do you mean, it got out?"

Matthew's eyes lifted again, fixing on her like a man caught between confession and warning.

"It followed us," he whispered, voice rough, frayed at the edges. "And now it's here."

Behind her, Mira stood trying to understand what was going on beneath the words, glancing between Matthew and Celeste. "Here—where? Here in the city? In an Arc?"

Matthew didn't break his stare. His gaze locked on Celeste with unnerving stillness, and when he finally answered, the words came like a secret dragging itself into the open.

"In me."

The words barely left his lips before the black began to spread.

It wasn't sudden. Not all at once.

The irises seeping outwards, bleeding into the whites of his eyes in slow, steady waves—like oil spilling across glass, swallowing the colour, smothering the light.

What little remained of the white thinned, narrowing like the edge of a closing door, the contrast was stark—unnatural. The kind of wrong that made her skin crawl. It continued until only endless black stared back at her—deep and hollow, as if the pupils had swallowed the world.

The kind of wrong you couldn't explain away as a trick of the light.

The room seemed to tighten around them, the silence pressing against her eardrums.

Too sharp

Too loud.

Behind her, Mira's breath caught, the sound small but audible in the heavy stillness.

Celeste forced herself to stay still, her face composed, but her mind was already racing—cataloguing, calculating.

Every breath felt too loud in her chest.

Her fingers twitched against her knee, and she forced them still.

The black in his eyes kept growing, swallowing the last flecks of white.

Her pulse thudded sharp and fast, but her posture didn't shift.

Stay in control. Stay focused.

She leaned forward slightly—just enough to keep his attention, to mask the pounding in her head.

You've seen worse.

But she hadn't. Not like this.

Not something aware.

Her throat felt dry, the air too thin. She swallowed carefully, slow—measured.

Eyes like a void. Endless. Watching her.

A cold trickle ran down her spine, but she didn't move. Didn't let it show.

Couldn't.

If she broke now, it would be over.

Whatever she was dealing with—this was no ordinary survivor. “Matthew,” she said quietly, leaning forward slightly. “Whatever you think is inside you—whatever you saw—tell me everything. If it’s real, we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

Matthew stared at her, lips parting like he wanted to say something else.

Then—he flinched. Hard.

Like something had pulled at him from inside.

“Celeste—” Mira started.

Celeste raised a hand, stopping her. “Stay back.”

Her eyes never left Matthew.

He hunched forward, hands digging into his head, breath coming in sharp gasps.

Celeste’s voice stayed calm. “Matthew. Stay with me. Tell me what’s happening.”

He looked up, eyes black as ever, but now there was a flicker of something behind them—something wrong.

“It’s watching you too,” he whispered.

Celeste’s breath caught in her chest, but she didn’t move.

Mira tensed, her eyes wide.

Matthew leaned in slightly, like sharing a secret.

“It likes you,” he whispered.

Celeste didn’t blink.

She leaned forward, voice soft but firm. “Tell me what it is.”

“Celeste.” The man that used to be Matthew stared at her. “You’re not in control here.”

And for a moment—just a flicker—something else moved behind his eyes.

Something that wasn’t human.

Celeste kept her body still, her face composed. But inside—

Everything sped up.

Not panic. Not yet.

She tracked Matthew's—The black-eyed man's—breathing. The slow clench and release of his fingers. The way his eyes—those black, endless eyes—never left her.

Her throat felt tight.

She shifted her weight subtly, one boot anchoring against the floor. A brace. A plan.

Her mind started mapping the room without moving her head—distance to the door, how long it would take her to input the code to get out of the room, Mira's position behind her.

Protect Mira. Hold the line.

The pulse in her neck thudded hard enough she was sure the black-eyed man could hear it, but she kept her expression calm. Detached. Like she wasn't standing three metres from something that wasn't supposed to exist.

Mira was close. Too close.

Celeste resisted the urge to glance back at her. If she did, if she *looked*, the black-eyed man would see it—would know she was afraid.

Would know of her importance.

Her nails dug into her palm where he couldn't see. Pain kept her sharp. Present.

Still, her mind whispered—

Something's wrong.

Something is very, very wrong.

She inhaled slowly, deep enough to push her heart rate down.

"You're here now," she said softly, watching the black-eyed man's face, every micro-shift. "But so am I."

And if she had to be the one standing between whatever this was and Mira—

She would.

Then—just barely—his lips parted.

But the sound that came out wasn't speech.

It was a hum.

Low, quiet, off-key. A few notes strung together, absentminded.

Celeste frowned. Familiar.

Then, it clicked.

Her stomach turned to ice.

That song.

Not something from an Arc playlist.

Her dad's song.

A melody he made up when she was little, something he used to play on guitar late at night when he thought she was asleep. He never recorded it. Never played it for anyone else.

Just a quiet, wandering tune. Soft, meandering notes that never quite resolved, circling back on themselves.

A song that had no name.

That no one else should know.

Her breath hitched.

She stared at him, pulse hammering in her ears.

He wasn't looking at her.

He was just... humming.

Like it meant nothing.

Like it meant everything.

"Is that supposed to be cute?" Celeste asked, her voice thinner than she intended, her breath already coming faster.

The black-eyed man just stared at her, that smile carved deep across his face.

Then he whispered,

"Five."

A long exhale.

One of the survivors convulsed violently—vitals spiking, then crashing.

The shrill, droning flatline filled the room.

Celeste's head snapped toward the monitor, her pulse hammering.

"What the hell?—Celeste!" Mira's voice broke as she scrambled to the collapsing man, fingers desperately searching for a pulse. Nothing.

Tears welled in Mira's eyes, panic rising. She gripped the man by his collar, yanking him off the bench and starting CPR with shaking arms.

"Four."

The black-eyed man tilted his head toward the next survivor.

A gasp—sharp and strangled.

Another monitor screamed to life.

Celeste stood sharply, her chair scraping back. "Stop."

Her breath was shallow, her chest tightening.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Her mind filled in the rhythm.

It pounded in her skull—too perfect.

Her body moved on instinct—buried warning rising fast.

She'd seen this before.

Not in rooms like this. Not from men like him.

In old, sealed files. Flagged errors.

Not failures.

Purges.

Her pulse slammed against her ribs.

"Stop," she hissed. "Stop counting."

The black-eyed man just smiled.

Celeste turned sharply to Mira—her friend's face pale, desperate, torn between bodies she couldn't save.

Too many.

Too few of her.

Too little time.

"Three."

Another body dropped—lifeless, crumpling into itself.

Celeste lunged. Two strides and she was on him, hands snapping around his throat.

"Stop this!" she growled.

Her fingers dug deep into flesh—but he didn't flinch.

Still smiling.

He turned, looking past her, toward the other remaining survivor—the woman who

had been mumbling to herself all along.

Slowly, the woman lifted her head, her wide eyes locking on him.

"No. No no no no," she whimpered—then screamed, a sharp, piercing sound that made Mira recoil, covering her ears.

"Two."

The woman gasped once, a hollow sound—

Then her body went still.

Her monitor shrieked its final, piercing tone.

Mira dove back into chest compressions, frantic, helpless.

Celeste released one hand from his throat and punched the black-eyed man as hard as she could.

Knuckles cracked against bone.

But his head only jerked back—then rolled lazily forward, grin still in place, black eyes gleaming.

His lips barely moved as he whispered,

"One."

Then—

He went limp.

Like a marionette with its strings cut, his body sagged forward.

Every monitor in the room fell silent, like someone had switched them off all at once.

The stillness was suffocating.

Celeste's hand shot back to his throat, her grip like iron, rage burning under her skin.

His body was still warm.

Still tense.

But he was gone.

She stayed there, frozen.

Her mind racing, struggling to make sense of what she had just seen—just failed to stop.

The world felt sharp.

Too bright.

And yet, crushingly silent.

Slowly, she let him go.

His body slumped forward, landing facedown on the floor with a dull, final thud.

Celeste turned, scanning the room.

Bodies.

Everywhere.

Mira was still kneeling over the first man, hands working with futile desperation.

Around them, the monitors flickered weakly—ghostly glows casting pale light over the dead.

Nothing moved.

Nothing changed.

Just the weight of what had happened, pressing down on both of them.

Celeste crossed to her and knelt, placing a steady hand on Mira's shoulder. She caught Mira's eyes, holding them.

"Stop," Celeste said softly, but firmly. She squeezed Mira's arm, a subtle pull.

For a few seconds, Mira kept going, her hands moving in rhythm—until her body gave out.

She sat back on her heels, breath ragged and tears brimming, then scrambled backwards until she reached the corner near the door, curling in on herself with her arms wrapped tightly around her legs.

The air was thick, pressing in from all sides. The scent of antiseptic and recycled air layered over something else—something metallic.

Celeste rose, moving to the security panel, her fingers reaching for the keys—but before she could enter her code, the reinforced locks hissed and sealed the room. Her head snapped to the door, breath catching as her mind searched for logic that wasn't there. Nothing about this made sense. There was no reason, no cause—just the sound of locks closing, cold and final. And for the first time, reason was useless to her.

Her hands trembled. Her breath was too slow, too measured, like her body was trying to contain the panic building in her chest.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

She exhaled hard, fighting to stay grounded. Her eyes slid to one of the bodies.

Still warm.

Still human.

But not alive.

Not dead.

Just stopped.

Celeste's voice cut the air—low, sharp, fraying at the edges. She locked eyes with the technician through the glass. "What the hell just happened?"

Nothing.

On the other side of the window, the technician didn't move. Didn't answer.

Celeste's pulse roared in her ears. She took a step toward the glass, her voice rising, jagged and strained. "They were alive. I saw them. I saw it in their eyes. And now —"

Her hand slashed through the air, sharp and desperate. "Now they're just... this."

Her breath came fast, shallow, as she stared at the bodies, her mind scrambling for reason that wouldn't come. "Explain it!" she snapped, her voice cracking on the last word. "Make it make sense!"

Mira exhaled sharply, but didn't respond.

Celeste looked down at Mira, softening her voice, careful not to push her further. "They didn't just die, Mira," she murmured, steady but low. "He chose to kill them."

Silence stretched between them.

"Shit." The word wasn't Mira's.

Celeste turned sharply, eyes narrowing on the technician. His face had gone pale, hands trembling as he stared down at his tablet.

Celeste was in front of his viewing window in three steps. "Show me."

He turned the screen toward her, swallowing hard.

His voice broke slightly, "Their neural scans..."

Celeste's stomach clenched.

The scans showed not death—but something else.

Corruption.

She stared at the screen. "What is this?"

The technician shook his head, voice hollow. "It's not post death shutdown. Their minds were... overwritten."

Her pulse surged in her throat. "Overwritten?"

Not a flatline. Not decay.

The brain patterns collapsed, spiralling inward—erased, rewritten, layered and scrubbed until nothing remained.

"Delete it."

The technician flinched looking around. "What?"

Celeste's head snapped toward a man in the rear corner of the room. Vance strode toward the window.

Vance's voice left no room for argument. "Erase it. All of it."

Celeste stared. "Vance. This is a cover-up."

"This is containment," Vance said flatly. "Until we know what we're dealing with, no one sees this."

Her jaw clenched—but she knew he wasn't wrong. Not yet.

"You said that if this gets worse, then I get everything."

Vance held her gaze, then nodded. "Agreed."

"Everything Vance." She repeated with finality.

He nodded.

Celeste turned to the technician. "Every log. Every scan. Everything."

The technician nodded shakily.

Then—

A deep mechanical alarm rumbled through the facility.

Celeste froze.

The lights flickered, and the tablet in technician's hands flashed red.

With a sudden jolt, containment shutters slammed down between the air lock and the viewing window sealing them inside with finality.

The technicians voice crackled through the speaker. "That's not us."

A droning tone sounded behind Celeste, and she swung around. The survivors' monitors had reactivated, all flatlining. The drone was ear-piercing. Glitched. Static danced across the screens—until one word blinked to life:

WAKING

A chill ran down Celeste's spine.

The moment she turned to look at Mira, everything changed.

One of the monitors let out a single beep—a heartbeat.

Celeste's pulse slammed into her throat.

A sharp thud cracked through the room—behind her.

"Vance..." she breathed.

Silence.

No answer.

Her stomach twisted.

She turned—

He was sitting up.

Straight-backed.

Head tilted.

Eyes black and endless.

His lips parted, sucking in a soundless breath.

The lights died.

Darkness swallowed the room whole.

Celeste froze.

The sound of another inhale—slow, ragged, too close—scraped through the dark.

Red emergency lights snapped on, painting the room in blood.

The man was standing.

Celeste's lungs locked tight.

Her eyes darted to the side, searching for Mira—there, shaking in the corner.

Movement—

The reflection in the glass.

He was behind her.

Right there.

A breath brushed her ear—cold and wrong.

A whisper, sharp and soft all at once:

"You're not alone."

She spun around—

Empty.

The black-eyed man lay exactly where she had left him—like he had never moved at all.

Her chest tightened.

The screen blinked once—jarring in the stillness.

I'M WATCHING

The words pulsed faintly, like a heartbeat she couldn't escape.

Her pulse pounded hard in her ears, drowning out everything else.

Slowly, her eyes tracked across the room—

To Mira.

Still in the corner, arms clamped tight around her knees, rocking, pale as death.

Her body trembled in tight, jagged jerks. Like she was trying to hold herself together from the inside out.

Celeste forced her legs to move—one step, then another.

She crouched low, her hand reaching out, fingers light but steady as she wrapped an arm around Mira's shoulders.

She felt Mira flinch under her touch—but then lean into it, desperate, broken.

Celeste leaned in close, her voice low and calm, though her chest was a storm.

Words meant only for Mira.

A lifeline.

"We're done," she whispered.

Mira shuddered out a breath, leaning against her for just a second longer before pulling away, silent but still trembling.

Celeste rose slowly—her head turning to look back at the body on the floor.

Gone.

Her heart lurched.

No.

Not gone.

Back on the bench—sitting there hunched over like he'd never moved, never stood, never whispered in her ear.

Her stomach twisted.

Behind her—

Beep.

A single, sharp note from the first monitor.

Celeste flinched.

Beep.

The second.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Beep.

The third.

Her pulse slammed harder.

Beep.

The fourth.

Celeste turned slowly, like moving too fast might break something fragile in the room.

Beep.

The fifth.

Each monitor offering one, clean note.

One after the other.

A sound like a heartbeat.

But not.

Not when there were no hearts left to beat.

She stared at them—frozen—her mind racing but finding no answers, no logic, no sense to hold onto.

Her hand twitched at her side.

A countdown.

But to what?

Click, the reinforced door unlocked.

The room was too still, too sharp, like reality was holding its breath—waiting to see what she would do.

Her throat was dry, her body screaming at her to move, to run—but there was nowhere to go.

Slowly—mechanically—Celeste's gaze slid to the door.

Vance would be coming.

She couldn't let him see this.

But if she stepped out, would she take it with her?

One last glance at the monitors.

Still glowing.

Still silent.

But in her mind, those beeps echoed, a rhythm she couldn't unhear—

Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

And something was waiting on the other side.

The hairs on the back of her neck raised.

It was only beginning.

Behind her, the doors hissed open, cutting sharp through the quiet.

Vance stood in the threshold, taking in the scene. His usual corporate calm faltered—just for a second—when he saw the bodies, the flickering monitors, and the look on Mira's face.

"Get her out of here," Celeste said, her voice quiet, but firm enough to leave no room for argument.

Vance didn't hesitate. He turned slightly and clicked his fingers in the air behind him.

Two medics slipped past him, crouching by Mira, speaking in low, soothing tones.

She let them help her to her feet, moving like a ghost, her eyes never leaving Celeste—clinging to her as if she were the last solid thing in the room.

Celeste watched them go, standing still until the doors sealed shut again behind Mira and the medics.

Only then did she move.

Her eyes slid to Vance, who was still watching her. Waiting.

Celeste squared her shoulders, her face set in stone. "I want those files now." Her voice was low, sharp, cutting through the weight hanging in the air.

Vance gave a stiff nod, though tension braced his jaw. He stepped aside, motioning for her to follow.

"Come on," he muttered, quieter now. "Let's see what the system recorded."

Celeste brushed past him, her stride deliberate—measured.

Whatever had happened in that room, it wasn't over.

And she wasn't leaving without answers.